Gay marriage ban hits snag

Amendment can't muster majority in Senate

KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON • President Bush and supporters of a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage suffered an embarrassing defeat Wednesday when the proposal failed to get a simple majority in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The amendment lost with 50 senators voting to block it and 48 voting to advance it on a procedural vote, leaving backers 19 votes shy of the two-thirds majority they eventually would need to pass a constitutional amendment saying marriage can be only between one man and one woman.

"The president and the Republican leadership's attempt to divide the country backfired, and instead it divided the Republican Party," said Cheryl Jacques, president of Human Rights Campaign, a gay rights organization that opposed the amendment.

Six Republicans bucked their party leadership and voted against the measure. Three Democrats sided with Republicans on the procedural vote, which needed the support of 60 senators to bring the amendment to a full Senate vote.

Supporters of the amendment said they weren't embarrassed, proclaiming Wednesday's vote a positive first step. They said they were happy to highlight the gay marriage issue during more than three days of debate.

"The battle has just begun," said Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., the main sponsor of the amendment.

Conservative activists said they will continue to press the issue and that Wednesday's vote showed them which senators they need to try to defeat in November elections.

"There ought to be votes until the desire of the American people has been realized on this," said Gary Bauer, the president of the conservative group American Values, citing national polls that show a large majority of Americans oppose marriage for gays and lesbians.

Bush said he was "deeply disappointed" by the vote.

The Republican decision to focus on gay marriage, however, could harm the party with moderate voters this November and put some moderate members of Congress in an awkward situation, said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a political analyst at the University of Southern California.

"It was not a success on any level for the president," she said.

After a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruling last year that legalized gay marriage and with San Francisco issuing same-sex marriage licenses, Bush in February called for a constitutional amendment banning such unions.

HOW THEY VOTED

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., sponsor of the measure, voted yes Wednesday on the gay marriage amendment, while Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colo., voted no. On this vote, a yes vote was a vote to advance the measure and a no vote was a vote to stop it.

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